

2007

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Recommended Citation

Toler, Emily (2007) "The Way, the Truth, and the Stuff: The Exploitation of Spiritual and Status Anxiety in *Relevant* Magazine," *Articulāte*: Vol. 12 , Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol12/iss1/4>

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The Way, the Truth, and the Stuff: The Exploitation of Spiritual and Status
Anxiety
in *Relevant* Magazine

Emily Toler '08

American Christians are suffering an identity crisis. As the major forces shaping the religion's public face become increasingly conservative, they are alienating the tradition's young adults who have been raised as much on the gospel of MTV as the gospel of Matthew, forcing them to choose between these two worlds. In an attempt to confront this choice, many of these 18- to 34-year-olds reject traditional ways of being Christian but remain profoundly interested in being spiritual. Even though fewer than half of them read the Bible more than once a year, 60% still believe it is relevant to their lives (Grossman). Although this young adult demographic's anxieties are well known among advertisers and publishers alike, until *Relevant* magazine began to circulate in 2003, no publication had specifically targeted its spiritually-attuned subset. To address these readers' needs and desires, *Relevant* magazine faced a unique challenge: to negotiate the boundary between living a life as a Christian and consumer and to alleviate the tension that accompanies this task. Although *Relevant* claims to bridge the gulf between the secular and the sacred, the magazine actually exploits the anxieties that this division creates, simultaneously encouraging readers both to reject pop-culture commercialism in favor of a more "spiritual" ethos and to obey the materialist impulse to buy.

Given Jesus' less-than-genial relations with the Roman majority and its moneylenders, it's hardly a stretch to associate him with rebellion. *Relevant* cleverly employs this common anti-establishment motif to reach its specific demographic: the "hip, forward-thinking, spiritually attuned twentysomething" ("Who We Are"). It's difficult to imagine a narrower marketing niche, and editor Cameron Strang's choice to pursue it certainly represents a leap of faith. But, because taking a chance without the data to support it is all but suicidal in the world of print publication, Strang and his coworkers did the research to define their readers—and their readers' anxieties—carefully.

In the materials that potential advertisers receive, *Relevant* makes it clear that, while its audience may be forward-thinking and rebellious, its financial goals are firmly mainstream. Even though the magazine is willing to take chances on its readership, there is no evidence of risky business when it comes to generating revenue; after all, according to the "Who We Are" statement published on its website, *Relevant* is "a self-contained, for-profit business not affiliated with any other companies, denominations, or organizations." As such, the magazine relies, at least in part, on revenue generated by paid advertisements. Because the pool of advertisers interested

in a magazine with such a specific demographic is likely to be smaller than the one available to its competitors, *Relevant* uses its Media Kit to convince potential advertisers that even the spiritual seeker has very deep pockets.

The data that *Relevant* has collected to support these claims about its readers are impressive—and tempting for advertisers. Boasting an average income of almost \$60,000 annually and an average net worth of \$184,382 (“Reader Demographics”), the *Relevant* reader clearly has the financial means to make major purchases. Simply that this reader has so much money at his disposal does not, however, necessarily mean that he will spend it—or does it? *Relevant* is certainly justified in thinking so, as its research indicates that these consumers purchase two CDs every month, buy thirty books every year, and listen to almost thirty hours of music every week. In short, the reader is “gear- and status-oriented, and always up-to-date on the latest gadgets, clothing and cars” (“Who We Are”)—that is, he has a wide variety of ways and reasons to spend his cash. It shouldn’t be surprising to hear a publication speaking so patronizingly about its readership’s concerns; in fact, pinpointing these specific status anxieties that plague the *Relevant* reader is an effective way for the magazine to generate revenue. Because the financial realities of the competitive world of print publishing apply to everyone—even *Relevant*, whose Media Kit ultimately reveals that it targets the “18-to-34 age bracket because they buy a lot of stuff”—it’s difficult to blame the magazine for catering to its readers’ materialist sensibilities—at least until we realize that fueling this *gimme* impetus directly contradicts the other messages that *Relevant* proposes.

Michelle Bearden’s 2003 article, published in the *Tampa Tribune*, observes that editor Cameron Strang hopes to use his magazine to “[bridge] the gap between sacred and secular” and “challenge our generation about their faith, not tell them how to live it.” These aspirations, heartwarming though they may be, seem almost diametrically opposed to the content of the articles that *Relevant* actually publishes. For example, a spread featuring soul singer/songwriter India.Arie graces pages 60-61 of the July-August 2006 issue, offering insight into the artist’s psychological, spiritual, and fashionable development. Fully half the article’s content is devoted not to a discussion of her music—although the titles of her hit singles and records are mentioned frequently, lest the reader miss an opportunity to *spend*—but to her changing sense of style and supposed rebellion against the same commercializing economy that supports her. (Pointing out the obvious irony of, for example, her denouncing the fashion industry but still accepting awards from *Vogue* seems unnecessary.) While reserving ample space for a discussion of India.Arie’s personal (and imitable!) wardrobe choices, the article lists her upcoming projects, all of which will be available for the buying: a book, a line of handbags, and a clothing and jewelry line. This relentless emphasis on commodities might not seem to be a problem until we consider the title of the subsection in which it appears: “strength, courage, &

wisdom.” By placing these subtle directives to buy under a heading with more spiritual connotations, *Relevant* confuses its reader; the magazine suggests that the reader can find the same inner peace that India.Arie enjoys—as long as he or she does it while listening to her latest album.

To fuse the material and the spiritual in this way is clever, but these mixed messages pale in comparison to the more confusing editorial choices made elsewhere in the publication. In the article immediately following this feature (62-64), author Craig Borlase takes on the daunting task of “deconstructing a me-first faith.” To do so, he employs the very tactics that editor Strang promised to avoid: contrasting the spiritual with the secular and telling the reader how to live his faith. Citing various passages from the Bible, the author concludes that living as a Christian “means handing over our own agendas in place of serving God and others [even though] it might not be sexy or culturally on-message.” This contradiction between popular culture and Borlase’s message is a confusing one; he himself recognizes that *Relevant*’s readers are more likely to “spend more time worrying about iTunes playlists [...] than persecution,” yet instructs them to reject this cultural milieu in favor of a less selfish ethic. The article clearly suggests that spiritual fulfillment can be found not by joining the cult of materialism but by summarily rejecting it.

This imperative is not problematic until we consider the fact that many of the pages of *Relevant* are advertisements, compelling readers to buy this album, read this book, drink this coffee, adopt this lifestyle. How can the bewildered reader be expected to negotiate such tricky psychological territory? Fortunately, *Relevant* provides the solution: a one-page piece called “The Scene” (36). This feature provides readers with a wealth of information about how they can, at long last, reconcile the parts of their lives that Borlase’s article separated so distinctly. With such helpful sections as “Where to Worship” and “Imbibe the Vibe with the Locals,” “The Scene” acts as a how-to guide for its self-conscious readers, steering them in the direction of the most progressive churches and coolest coffeehouses while sparing them awkward run-ins with other twentysomethings who may not be sufficiently *hip*. If they’re not convinced, readers can even conduct their own research: the web addresses of each organization mentioned in “The Scene” are clearly provided.

Even more compelling evidence of this hypercommercialization comes in a feature called “Slices” (20-34). Easily the longest piece in the magazine (which hints at the importance its editors assign it), “Slices” mixes product reviews and music publicity with full-color advertisements and articles on a variety of topics, presenting readers with visual representations of the magazine’s implicit conflict. For example, although page 22 of this piece is entitled “Bible Showdown,” its longest and most prominent section is not a discussion of the Bible but of “The Ultimate Coffee Showdown.” This apparent mix-up is not an innocent editorial goof; it’s a conscious decision designed to confuse readers’ ideas about the proper weight to assign

their spiritual and secular priorities. This process of commodification culminates on page 26, when *Relevant* fully abandons its spiritual guise in favor of a decidedly materialistic one, encouraging its readers to "save on gas so you can buy a PS3." If there are any lingering doubts about the extent to which *Relevant* is a product of the very commercial society its contributors decry, the inclusion of such features as "The Scene" and "Slices" should certainly dispel them.

Manipulating readers like this is hardly a novel tactic in the world of magazine publishing. The problem, however, is that by exploiting its readers' anxieties about how to define themselves, *Relevant* is engaging in the very practices it denounces. By directing its readers to reject materialism, the magazine suggests that they should oppose the widespread culture of consumption, but by bombarding them with advertisements and instructions about how to be *cool*, the magazine suggests that they should embrace it. This contradiction obviously baffles the reader; what's the spiritually- and status-hungry twentysomething to do? Read *Relevant*, of course! Indeed, the main reason that *Relevant* perpetuates this dichotomy is to prey on the characteristic anxieties of young adults and thereby ensure that its readers will keep coming back. For all its allusions to "progressive culture," the magazine's most appropriate motto may be a much older one: Ye shall know *Relevant*, and *Relevant* shall set ye free.

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